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The Value of Emotional Intelligence for High Performance Coaching:

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

In their article, Jonathan Chan and Clifford Mallett present the case for the positive effects that high-performance coaches can realize by incorporating leadership qualities that include 'soft skills' like emotional intelligence into their coaching repertoires. The authors propose that coaches' emotional intelligence can augment their technical skills to encourage high performance in their athletes, and manage the dynamics between coach, athlete, team and performance.

Emotional intelligence is described as the ability to understand and manage one's own and others' emotions. The Mayer-Salovey abilities model [1] uses a developmental hierarchy that moves from the baseline level of EI which is perceiving emotions, through increasingly sophisticated levels from using emotions to facilitate thought, to understanding emotions, and finally to managing emotions. Such abilities are critical for inspiring high performance in both athletes and employees. There has been a great deal of interest and many questions (which the authors note) concerning the concept of emotional intelligence and its applicability to leadership and performance. However, there is little doubt that coaches and leaders who are able to accurately read the moods of their teams and constructively channel those emotions and behaviours in positive directions are effective. Constructively harnessing emotions in sports and business leadership is critical for realizing positive outcomes [2, 3].

In this commentary, I focus on two related themes from Chan's and Mallett's article, empathy and emotional contagion. A foundational task for high-performance coaches is the establishment of trusting relationships with their athletes. The emotional intelligence competency empathy is a key factor in understanding and managing relationships. Without practicing empathy coaches cannot develop and nurture strong relationships with their athletes. Coaches that do not have strong relationships with their athletes will be less effective in motivating and encouraging their best performances. The effective demonstration of empathy can also lead to the type of "positive boosts" and emotional contagion that authors Chan and Mallett describe in their article as being critical to managing the dynamics of individual and team performance in athletics. Relying on empathy to understand how a team is feeling and using that information to provide a much-needed pep talk or light a fire when team energy is flagging can spread positive emotional contagion and inspire greater individual and team performance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

Coaches are to their athletes what business leaders are to their employees – tasked with not just getting something done by setting goals and giving directions and instructions, they are also tasked with motivating, influencing, and developing their athletes to attain new levels of skill and commitment to compete. Coaches and business leaders can only be effective in doing these critical tasks if they establish supportive emotional connections with their people [4]. These emotional connections are built through empathy, the desire and ability to understand others. Empathy has been described as the “basis for all emotional skills” [4], and is represented in the Mayer and Salovey Abilities Model of emotional intelligence in Branch 3, “understanding emotions” [1]. Empathy is the ability to pick up signals from others about their moods. It is being attuned to the people and the environment around you, always picking up clues about where people are, whether they are up or down, able to move forward with the task at hand or needing some additional attention, care, encouragement or challenge. Individuals who demonstrate a high degree of empathy are hyper-aware, constantly scanning their environment.

A high-performance coach cannot be effective without establishing an emotional connection with her players. In order to inspire and encourage the best performance an athlete can give, that coach must be trusted and respected by the athlete. The relationship must be reciprocal in that both coach and athlete are focused on the development of the individual and the team in service of agreed-upon performance and development outcomes. Through this empathetic relationship the best coaches communicate their belief in their athletes’ abilities to excel in their sport and dedicate themselves to the physical and mental regimens necessary to perform at their best.

High performing coaches occasionally may need to push their athletes harder, faster and farther to ensure that they are doing what is necessary in order to excel. This may take the form of drills or practices that may seem harsh to an outsider, but may be required to reignite a passion or tap into a reservoir of strength of which the athlete may have temporarily lost sight. If a basketball coach of an elite team playing in a championship game sees that his team is missing their shots, the coach may call a time out and use that time to build confidence in his players by reminding them of the prior successful shots they’ve made against the opponents they’ve faced that have gotten them to this moment in the season. The key to being effective in such situations is empathy; relying on the deep understanding and emotional connection that coaches have developed with their players over time. Empathy helps coaches decide which approach best fits a given situation.

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

The athletic coach like the business CEO is the person who sets the emotional tone of the team or the organization. Those leaders who create positive and challenging environments, and encourage and support their teams in attaining their goals and aspirations are arguably more effective than those leaders who are preoccupied, stressed, neglectful and clueless. Emotional contagion is a ripple effect that takes over a team or an organization. Numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of a leader’s emotional tone on the group or organization [5, 6]. Understanding the mood of the athlete and the team and channelling positive energy in difficult moments can uplift a team and help them move past immediate challenges to effective and often inspired performance.

Coaches and leaders who spread positive emotional contagion can be said to be resonant leaders [7], those that lead from their hearts as well as their heads. Resonant leaders are inspirational, create an emotional tone characterized by hope and compassion, and are

attuned to self, others and their environments [7]. As Chan and Mallett note in their article, coaches and leaders that 'generate positive boosts' are positively reinforcing desired behaviours and role modelling how they want their athletes to comport themselves in order to create a team atmosphere that encourages the best possible performance from each team member.

CONCLUSION

The powerful combination of empathy and positive emotional contagion are effective mechanisms for inspiring and motivating athletes and employees. Coaches and leaders who develop relationships based on empathy and mutual trust, and employ positive boosts to spread emotional contagion will likely find themselves at the helm of high-performing teams and organizations.

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